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Capitalism, Politics, and Railroads in Jacksonian New
England (review)

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not discuss landmaking in other cities. Seasholes encourages researchers to undertake studies of landmaking elsewhere, but does not present a convincing case for doing so. What questions would such studies answer, beyond where, when, and with what?

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Dr. Wermiel's research focuses on construction history. She recently completed a book on American lighthouse construction.

Capitalism, Politics, and Railroads in Jacksonian New England.

By Michael J. Connolly. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.
Pp. ix+210. \$44.95.

If you want to understand politics, first you have to understand railroads. That is the case, at least, in parts of New Hampshire and Massachusetts from the late 1830s well into the 1840s. Railroad development dominated political discourse while ripping apart established political alliances. More compellingly, the railroad issue allows historians to develop a richer understanding of the complex attitudes that Jacksonian Democrats exhibited toward business enterprise and economic development. Michael Connolly explores these issues in a book that is persuasively argued even if lacking some of the scope and analytical sophistication of Steven Usselman's *Regulating Railroad Innovation*, Colleen Dunlavy's *Politics and Industrialization*, or Gerald Berk's *Alternative Tracks*.

Jacksonian Democrats opposed railroad expansion in New Hampshire, not because they opposed capitalism and property rights but because they were trying to defend a particular vision of capitalism and property rights—a vision of private property that guaranteed independence through economic self-sufficiency. Railroads threatened the private sphere on three counts. First, eminent domain gave the state the power to seize private property, rather than safeguard it. Second, the railroads usurped the traditionally public responsibility for mail delivery. And, finally, there was a clear conflict of interest when elected officials (including Governor Isaac Hill) simultaneously invested in the railroads that they were supposed to control.

What followed was a seesaw battle that pitted radical, antirailroad Democrats against their more conservative colleagues, with the only real winners being the prorailroad Whigs. The acrimonious debate culminated in the Railroad Bill of 1840. This act, by repealing 1836 legislation that granted railroads the right of eminent domain, effectively halted railroad construction in the state. But the victorious radicals soon realized that they had gone too far. First they exempted individual railroads from the terms of the 1840 legislation, and later they repealed the law altogether. Ultimately, legislators and the public realized that railroads had a quasi-public function. They should be allowed special, state-sanctioned authority, in the

form of eminent domain, but they should also be subject to state authority and the will of the people, in the form of a state railroad commission. Surprisingly, some of the most vociferous opponents of railroad expansion hailed from the more economically developed southeastern region of the state, which was already tied to New England's incipient railroad network.

While enthusiastically supporting an initial wave of railroad construction, Whigs in Massachusetts divided over further development. "Vested Rights Whigs" argued that the construction of competing lines threatened the stability and public trust that the state had implicitly awarded to pioneering firms. "Opportunity Whigs" had a different vision of the role of the state, one that emphasized its obligation to provide its citizens with access to additional rail lines. In their view, public demand for service took precedence over private property rights.

Massachusetts Whigs were particularly concerned about the impact of the planned industrial community of Lowell. Outlying communities sought to use the railroad to tap into Lowell markets, or rival Lowell, or defend themselves from Lowell. As the long, convoluted story of railroad development in Essex County indicates, Whig elites could not agree on precisely what they wanted railroad development to accomplish. As a result, public support for railroad construction produced mixed results. Overall (and this should come as no surprise to anyone who has studied railroad history), railroad development in Massachusetts and New Hampshire was a distinctly mixed blessing. Some communities benefited from railroad development, others suffered, and still others seemed unaffected.

Capitalism, Politics, and Railroads in Jacksonian New England provides an insightful and effective summary of the political implications of technological change. The book is, nonetheless, very much an examination of political history, and not the history of technology. While newspaper editorials and legislative documents provide the bulk of the source material, records relating to the railroad companies themselves are largely absent. Railroads are treated as a black box—just sort of "there," ready to be pulled, prodded, manipulated, defined, and redefined by a select group of newspaper editors and political elites, irrespective of their actions as corporate entities. Hence, the reader learns a great deal about how certain political actors reacted to early railroad development in New England, but much less about the interaction between railroads and government as constituent elements of the political economy.

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